

# Swimming Upstream: Shifting the Purpose of an Existing Teaching Portfolio Requirement

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## Abstract

*As teacher-education institutions implement portfolios across contexts and for multiple purposes, assessment of their effectiveness specific to shifting programmatic goals often takes place. At the institution where this research is based, an effort is underway to shift the focus of the current teaching portfolio requirement from an exit or employment focus, summative in nature, to a formative focus where the students' professional growth and development can be represented over time. This paper presents the initial findings from a multiyear study when the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Elementary Certification Program began making this conceptual shift from a summative to formative teaching portfolio requirement. Working within a collaborative partnership model of teacher education, elementary education faculty and seminar instructors worked together to promote such a conceptual change, while serving the needs of both the teacher candidates and the schools in which the teacher candidates complete their fieldwork. Successes and challenges toward this goal focus on communication, knowledge, and support needs of the MAT students, department goals and current practices specific to implementing teaching portfolios, and institutional structures impacting the MAT program and the teaching portfolio requirement. These successes and challenges are discussed in this paper, along with suggestions for how the department will continue to promote the shift in the portfolio's purpose in future years.*

## Introduction

As teacher-education institutions implement portfolios across contexts and for multiple purposes, assessment of their effectiveness specific to shifting programmatic goals often takes place. At the institution where this research is based, an effort is underway to shift the purpose of the current teaching portfolio requirement from an exit or employment focus, summative in nature, to a formative focus where the students' professional growth and development can be represented over time. Traditionally, exit or employment portfolios are designed to show "best practices" in regard to a teacher candidate's readiness to teach. However, reflective- or growth-and-development portfolios are typically designed to enhance the teacher candidates' understanding of their own development as beginning teachers as they create their portfolios over time. This paper presents the initial findings from a multiyear study when the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Elementary Certification Program began making this conceptual shift from a summative to formative teaching portfolio requirement. Working within a collaborative partnership model of teacher education, elementary education faculty and seminar instructors worked together to promote such a conceptual change, while serving the needs of both the teacher candidates and the schools in which the teacher candidates complete their fieldwork. Additionally, graduate students became partners in this initiative as they communicated their concerns and needs in relation to the new portfolio focus, as well as how the department could best address them during a time of programmatic change. The successes and challenges toward the shift of the portfolio's purpose focus on the knowledge and support needs of the MAT students, department goals and current practices specific to implementing teaching

portfolios, effective communication, and institutional structures impacting the MAT program and the teaching portfolio requirement. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the department will continue to promote the shift in the portfolio's purpose in future years.

### **Portfolios in Teacher Education**

Many preservice teacher-education programs have transitioned to a performance-based mode of assessment in recent years, resulting in the increased use of teaching portfolios (Diez, 1998; Percheone, Pigg, Chung, & Souvney, 2005). Broadly speaking, "teaching portfolios" are defined as a collection of documents and evidence of a teacher's knowledge, experience, and ability. Teaching portfolios have been used to assess the readiness of prospective teachers to receive initial teaching license (Porter, Youngs, & Odden, 2001), as criteria for admission to student teaching (Zeichner, 2000), to support student-teaching experiences (Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997), and across entire teacher-education programs (e.g., Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). Moreover, given the importance of reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), many teacher educators are using portfolios as a vehicle for preservice teacher reflection (Lyons, 1998). In addition, portfolios are integral to the process of gaining "master teacher" certification via the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and portfolios are often examined by states within the process of relicensure of teachers (Zeichner & Wray, 2001). With the increased use of teaching portfolios by teacher-preparation programs, the need to shift and adjust the portfolio's existing purpose to ensure that it complements and reflects programmatic goals could become more commonplace.

#### *Portfolio Definitions*

Adapted from professions such as art, photography, fashion, advertising, and architecture, portfolios have historically been comprised of "best practice" samples of professional work, organized and stored in folders, notebooks, and attaché cases (Bird, 1990). The teaching portfolio, while building upon the concept of best practices, expands its boundaries when incorporated as a tool by which to capture the complexity of learning to teach. As Shulman explained in his article, "A Union of Insufficiencies" (1988), teaching portfolios, while holding promise of becoming a more authentic form of evaluation, are but one essential element in a holistic vision for teacher assessment.

Multiple definitions of a teaching portfolio have helped frame an understanding of their purpose and use. From portfolios being seen as a container of documents that provide evidence of someone's knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Bird, 1990), to portfolios being "filled with the evidence of the events of lives in classrooms" (Lyons, 1998, p. 117–8), these definitions stress the nature of the portfolio as a product. However, the definition provided by Wolf and Dietz (1998) embraces a summative approach to teaching portfolios by stating that "a teaching portfolio is a structured collection of teacher and student work created across diverse contexts over time, framed by reflection and enriched through collaboration, that has as its ultimate aim the advancement of teacher and student learning" (Wolf & Dietz, 1998, p. 13). This expanded definition stresses the critical elements of support and collaboration necessary when considering the successful development of a teaching portfolio. The importance of providing support to preservice teachers as they create their teaching portfolios is a central theme of this research and will be discussed later in this article in greater detail.

### *Types of Teaching Portfolios*

There are multiple purposes connected to a teaching portfolio's construction process and product completion (Simmons, 1996). Establishing a clear purpose for the portfolio determines the type of portfolio to be created, facilitates the selection of artifacts and the forms of evidence included, helps to direct the organization and structure of the portfolio, and assists in determining the type of support required (Barton & Collins, 1993; Simmons, 1996; Wolf & Dietz, 1998; Wray, 2007a; Zidon, 1996). Without a defined purpose, the entire process is at risk of turning into a meaningless assignment for both the students and faculty involved. In short, a clearly defined purpose can serve as a guidepost to both students and university faculty in that "once they [the portfolio's purpose(s)] are established, students seek to find and create practices that meet the needs" (Barton & Collins, 1993, p. 202). Several types of teaching portfolios, structured around various purposes, have been identified within the literature and can be classified into three broad categories: the learning portfolio, the certification portfolio, and the employment portfolio. Table 1 illustrates the different types of teaching portfolios, including their purpose and suggestions for content.

**Table 1**  
*Types of Teaching Portfolios*

Name	Purpose	Contents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Entrance portfolio (Zeichner, 1997)</li> </ul>	Used to inform program admission decisions  Used to evaluate students' readiness to begin student teaching	Work samples representing students' previous coursework and professional experiences  Documents speaking to students' qualifications (i.e., transcripts, letters of recommendation)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmental/ learning portfolio (Barton &amp; Collins, 1993)</li> </ul>	Documents student learning, growth, and development over time	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inquiry-based portfolio (Grant &amp; Huebner, 1998)</li> </ul>	Focus is on self-designed pedagogical questions	Primarily self-selected evidence: journal entries, observation notes, classroom artifacts including lesson plans, reports, course assignments, assessment tools, and video/ audiotaped lesson instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thematic portfolio (Dollase, 1998; Scanlan &amp; Heiden, 1996)</li> </ul>	Narrow focus on one main concept, area of interest, discipline, or issue	Primarily self-selected evidence: journal entries, observation notes, classroom artifacts including lesson plans, reports, course assignments assessment tools, and video/ audiotaped lesson instruction

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Purpose	Contents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflective portfolio (Lyons, 1998; Snyder, Lippincott, &amp; Bower, 1998)</li> </ul>	Inclusive of the teacher's process of thinking through connections between prior and new knowledge and experiences	Primarily self-selected evidence: journal entries, observation notes, classroom artifacts including lesson plans, reports, course assignments, assessment tools, and video/ audiotaped lesson instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certification/ assessment portfolio (Ryan &amp; Kuhs, 1993; Snyder, Lippincott, &amp; Bower, 1998; Wolf &amp; Dietz, 1998)</li> </ul>	Establishes preservice teachers' readiness to receive a course/program grade or certification  Coupled with local, state, and national standards and criteria  Also can inform programmatic and institutional assessment	Contents are dependent on purpose and institutional requirements and goals  Combination of self-selected and prescribed evidence: best practice work examples including lesson plans, assessment tools, educational philosophy statements, video/ audiotape of classroom interactions, formal evaluations, and recommendations from university and school supervisors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment portfolio (Montgomery, 1997; Wolf &amp; Dietz, 1998)</li> </ul>	Illustrates a teacher's strengths, abilities, qualifications, and experiences to prospective employer	Self-selected evidence representing best practices with documentation similar to certification portfolio  Course transcripts and curriculum vitae may also be included
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional portfolio (Montgomery, 1997)</li> </ul>	Informs promotion, relicensure, and national certification of in-service teachers  Representative of a teacher's professional capabilities, responsibilities, and professional development	Evidence selected reflects local, state, and national requirements Combination of prescribed and self-selected evidence including lesson plans, assessment tools, video/ audiotape of classroom interactions, reflection statements, formal evaluations, and recommendations from school supervisors

The purpose of a learning portfolio is to enable preservice teachers to develop and become aware of their own identity as teachers and learners (Wolfe & Dietz, 1998). Various forms of learning portfolios exist, including an inquiry-based portfolio, a thematic portfolio, and a growth-and-development or reflective portfolio. These types of portfolios deliberately engage preservice teachers in critical reflection and inquiry about their knowledge and ability specific to teaching, while documenting their growth in teaching over time. The common thread among all forms of learning portfolios is that they promote an in-depth view of the preservice teacher's process of thinking about his or her professional identity and classroom practice. This is accomplished when teachers make connections between prior knowledge, experiences,

skills, and new knowledge (Dollase, 1998; Grant & Huebner, 1998; Lyons, 1998; Scanlan & Heiden, 1996; Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998).

The notion that portfolios should contain a reflective component is frequently mentioned as an essential characteristic of portfolio design and process within the literature on teaching portfolios. The benefits of reflection within portfolios include the opportunity for students to learn about their own learning process (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991), and this portfolio process promotes awareness of students' knowledge of practice and of themselves as teachers (Lyons, 1998). In short, the portfolio process should inspire reflection more than anything else; without a strong focus on reflection, the portfolio could be little more than a document gathering exercise (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). Clearly, reflection should be an integral part of any teaching portfolio; however, the quality of such reflection needs thoughtful consideration. The importance of reflection within a teaching portfolio will be discussed in more detail later within this article.

The purpose of a credential or certification portfolio is to determine whether preservice teachers have demonstrated a level of proficiency on a set of teaching standards as a method of assessing prospective teachers' readiness to teach (Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). Thus, the portfolio might contain a combination of self-selected and prescribed evidence focusing on best practice work (e.g., lesson plans, assessment tools, educational philosophy statements, and video/audiotape of classroom interactions). However, even when teacher-education programs require preservice teachers to include evidence of proficiency on a set of teaching standards, there is still much variation in the portfolio. For example, the visions of good teaching embedded in the standards vary across programs, as does the nature of the requirements for the kinds of evidence that show mastery of a set of standards. Some programs encourage the presentation of a preservice teacher's best work in relation to the standards, while others may require preservice teachers to show evidence of growth over time, resulting in the inclusion of less-than-exemplary examples of teaching and learning in the portfolio. Still other programs require preservice teachers to show evidence of K-12 student learning (e.g., McConney, Schalock, & Schalock, 1998).

An employment portfolio, often called a best practice portfolio (Montgomery, 1997; Wolf & Dietz, 1998), can illustrate a preservice teacher's strengths, experiences, abilities, and qualifications to a prospective employer. An employment portfolio might contain self-selected evidence representing best practice with documentation similar to a certification portfolio. Course transcripts and curriculum vitae, as well as formal evaluations and recommendations from university and school supervisors, may also be included.

At least three distinct purposes around the use of teaching portfolios exist; some teacher-education programs have attempted to combine different purposes within a single teaching portfolio, while others have required separate portfolios for different purposes (see Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). Regardless of the portfolio's purpose, teaching portfolios adopt one of two main formats: paper or electronic. Paper teaching-portfolio formats involve the creation and housing of documents and artifacts within a traditional storage device such as a notebook or attaché. An electronic teaching portfolio is created by accessing and using a variety of technology supports and devices such as an electronic database system, electronic templates, and web-based authoring systems (Wray, 2007a).

At the institution where the research reported in this article was conducted, an effort is underway to shift the purpose of the current teaching-portfolio requirement from

employment, summative in nature, to learning, where students' professional growth and development can be represented over time, resulting in a more formative focus. This article presents findings from the first year of a multiyear study that is documenting how the MAT elementary certification program is making a conceptual shift from a summative to formative teaching-portfolio requirement for preservice teacher-education students. The questions guiding this research include:

1. What mechanisms of communication and support are needed to promote a shift in the portfolio's purpose from employment to growth and development?
2. What curricular and instructional decisions are needed to promote the implementation of a growth-and-development portfolio?
3. How do departmental and institutional guidelines and mandates enable or hinder the teaching portfolio's shift in focus?

This article focuses on the first phase of this study. In this phase, activities and discussions specific to the development of a growth-and-development teaching portfolio were integrated into a yearlong seminar course. Activities and discussions centered on how such support enabled or hindered the preservice teachers' understanding of the portfolio's purpose, as well as the development of their teaching portfolios.

### **Context of the Study**

This study took place within the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Literacy Education Department (ECELE) at a mid-size public university in the eastern United States. The mission statement of the department is to "prepare critical professionals who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to transform early childhood, elementary, and life-long literacy education in the service of social justice and democratic ideals" (ECELE New Faculty Handbook, 2005). Additionally, the College of Education and Human Services, with the ECELE department as one of seven departments, has adopted a document titled *The Portrait of a Teacher* as a conceptual framework to guide the development and assessment of all teacher candidates. *The Portrait of a Teacher* states that good teachers "continue to inquire into the nature of teaching and learning and reflect upon their own learning and professional practice." *The Portrait of a Teacher* also encourages the use of multiple forms of assessment from which to base evaluations regarding a student's readiness to teach. These goals require that our teacher-preparation programs offer students regular and ongoing opportunities to discuss, reflect upon, and critique teaching practices and experiences.

The Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Literacy Education houses the MAT program for elementary education. The MAT program, graduating an average of 55 students a semester, is a 36–37 credit program leading to state certification for elementary education (grades K–5) and a master's degree. The MAT program consists of core foundation and research courses, content methods courses, and a professional sequence of courses accompanied by a fieldwork component that places students in schools concurrent with professional seminars. Prior to the professional course sequence, students are required to observe and work within a variety of school settings to gain knowledge about systems of schooling in general and to learn about and work with specific student populations in conjunction with course foci. During the professional sequence, students engage in a "clinical year," equivalent to a year-long student-teaching experience, where students are placed in the

same school over two semesters. Students combine observation and teaching in the first semester of their clinical practicum, where the focus is on becoming familiar with the curriculum and school standards while creating relationships with cooperating teachers and students. The second semester, or student-teaching semester, continues the previous semester's foci while increasing the preservice teacher's responsibility for planning and implementing lessons and assessing student learning. Students are required to register for the corequisite seminar course, which meets once a week over 10 weeks, for both clinical semesters.

Currently, MAT students are required to create an employment portfolio upon completion of their student-teaching semester. Discussion of the teaching portfolio requirement generally takes place during the student-teaching semester within the corequisite seminar course. Directives specific to the portfolio requirement up to this point have, in the past, been relatively cursory and limited to discussing artifacts to include and reviewing sample portfolios completed by past graduates. With no formal requirements specific to content or organization, the portfolios have typically contained a selection of best-practice artifacts from coursework and field experiences (e.g., lesson plans, assessment tools, and samples of parent communication), documents specific to certification and program completion requirements (e.g., coursework transcripts, Praxis test scores, and fieldwork evaluation documents), and personal information documents (e.g., resume and letters of recommendation).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is shaped by *social constructionism*. Social constructionism assumes that learning and knowledge are understood through the "complex world of lived experiences," where meaning is fashioned out of "events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). This study revolved around students' developing understanding of a teaching portfolio—its purpose, structure, and content—via their social and professional interactions, resulting in the "collective generation of meaning" (Wray, 2007b, p. 1143) around the portfolio requirement. By situating this study within the context of a two-semester seminar, the preservice students and I were able to develop a relationship over time that encouraged thoughtful discussion and reflection upon the portfolio.

### **Methodology**

This study took place over the course of a two-semester pilot program where coursework and field experiences were linked to the development of a growth-and-development teaching portfolio. The course selected was a clinical seminar consisting of 22 elementary MAT students who met 20 times during the fall and spring semesters for a total of 30 hours. In addition to core course objectives specific to classroom management and effective teaching strategies, topics specific to creating a growth-and-development teaching portfolio were regularly integrated into the course content. The course content specific to the portfolio focused on understanding multiple, and often conflicting, purposes of the portfolio, the process of artifact selection, navigating the shift of artifacts to evidence, how to develop reflective narratives, how to make connections to personal educational philosophy statements, strategies for organizing the portfolio, and how to use the teaching portfolio during a job interview. These topics were integrated into the course through a variety of strategies including large- and small-group work; reading and discussion of portfolio literature (e.g., Lyons, 1998; Campbell,

Dignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles, & Wyman, 1997); and peer and instructor reviews of portfolio artifacts, reflective narrative statements, and the portfolios in progress. Additionally, examples of artifacts to be included in a teaching portfolio, examples of reflective narrative statements, and examples of completed portfolios were used to provide insight and to help frame instruction on the process of developing a teaching portfolio.

Data sources used in the study include a preinventory questionnaire, student exit interviews, a student exit questionnaire, a review of completed portfolios, and a researcher reflection log. The preinventory questionnaire that I developed for this study asked questions about students' understanding of teaching portfolios and their development. The students' responses on the preinventory questionnaire were used to frame our seminar discussions, and activities and were also used during the exit interviews as a way for students to reflect on their developing understanding of a teaching portfolio as a product and a process. The semistructured exit interview and exit questionnaire that I developed and conducted included open-ended questions specific to students' understanding of the portfolio's requirements and purpose and whether (and in what ways) the portfolio offered support during the seminar and was beneficial to the development of their growth-and-development portfolios. The researcher's log, used to record reflections on the course content, discussions, and activities, helped with the process of rethinking and clarifying future course plans.

Data analysis included transcribing the interviews (a form of initial analysis [Graue & Walsh, 1998]) and reviewing the interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, completed student portfolios, and research reflection logs. Coding was used to identify themes represented in the data, and the emergence of multiple codes across each of the previously described data sources was sought out in reference to the research questions. The themes revealed as a result of the data analysis include making personal and professional connections, issues of portfolio support, and multiple purposes.

Considering that I was the seminar instructor at the heart of this study, as well as the study's principle investigator, possible limitations of the study are situated around issues of coercion and power. It would be reasonable that students might feel that by participating in the interviews and portfolio review would please me or that their participation would influence a better course grade. These concerns were addressed by having a colleague recruit students to the study and by scheduling interviews and portfolio reviews after the course grades had been submitted.

## **Research Findings**

### *Personal and Professional Connections*

The articulation of personal connections specific to the complexity of teaching and learning is a form of professional development, a seminal benefit of the portfolio process. Many argue that the act of creating a portfolio helps students think about their work in more specific and critical ways, leading to enhanced understanding of teaching and learning (see Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997; Freidus, 1998; Lyons, 1998). This study supports the literature in this regard. The selection of artifacts and the process of shifting the artifacts to warranted evidence helped students make connections to who they were as novice teachers. The students and I spent many seminar sessions discussing different types of portfolio artifacts, what they might communicate about the students, and how to shape artifacts into warranted evidence. For example, during one seminar session, students shared artifacts that were being considered for inclusion in their portfolios. During the activity, the students were



to provide a context for the artifacts, telling how the artifacts connected to their educational philosophy and how they represented them as novice teachers. The discussion that ensued helped with the students', as well as their peers', understanding of how artifacts shift to warranted evidence and how to represent such evidence within the portfolio. Subsequently, the students brought in the same artifacts and their written narrative statements, and both were again discussed, providing the students with additional feedback and suggestions prior to the final placement of both into their teaching portfolios. These and other similar activities helped students make connections to their teacher preparation and to themselves as beginning teachers. Figure 1 contains one student's reflective narrative, articulating how she was able to make connections between the portfolio artifact and her educational philosophy. This particular narrative focuses on a social studies map unit, student work samples, and photographs of the classroom community map.

### Context

This lesson was created and implemented during my student-teaching semester in a first-grade classroom. The neighborhood map and the writing prompt that follow were the culminating projects at the end of my social studies map unit.

### Philosophy

This project reflects the following beliefs in my teaching philosophy:

- *In my classroom...every aspect of the child is valued. Their culture, their communities, their home life, their families, their dialect, and language are all interwoven into the fabric of the classroom community.*

The neighborhood map project was one that reflects my belief that learning should be tied to each child's experience both inside and outside of the classroom. Every child who participated in its creation felt that he or she was an expert in what was being asked. This was a representation of their home, of their school. They were proud of their hard work and were proud about displaying their map.

- *I believe that authentic learning must come from within each individual and be intrinsically motivated. Through the exploration of a child's existing knowledge and ideas, a teacher may then begin to provide appropriate connections and pathways to new understanding. These connections and pathways foster children's desire to learn.*

This lesson speaks to the value of tapping into every child's existing knowledge and then building upon that knowledge. I created paths to new learning by challenging the students to create an aerial map of the surrounding neighborhood. This required that they grasp the concepts of aerial mapping, spatial relationships, and understand and create their own map legend. The writing prompt extended the learning through to writing techniques and using a compass rose.

### Reflection

From start to finish, this entire unit was reflective of each child's own community and environment. Because of this, the children were engaged in the learning at each step. The unit solidified my belief in the importance of connecting the classroom to the lives of the children. It was the first time that I had implemented an entire unit that lent itself so well to making connections with prior knowledge. The success of each lesson only made my understanding of this importance that much stronger. Another strong point of the unit is that it can easily be adapted to any grade level. The complexity of the map can be adjusted depending on the objectives and skills to be acquired. There is no doubt in my mind that I will be using this unit in my future classroom.

**Figure 1.** Student narrative statement—first-grade social studies map lesson.

The data show that the students identified the process of creating reflective narratives within their portfolio as contributing to their professional development in that it required articulation of their beliefs as beginning teachers in a way that might not have come to light without the experience. Comments such as “it was an exercise in making careful and intelligent choices and justification” and “it forced me to solidify my ideas on teaching and on myself as an educator” illustrate the power of developing reflective narratives as a requirement of the portfolio-development process. The following student comment, given during an exit interview, is representative of the students’ responses overall: “While I had various ideas about why and how I want to teach, the process forced me to think about my practice and why I chose to place certain artifacts in the portfolio over others.” These comments strongly support claims that growth-and-development portfolios coupled with in-class support can indeed promote reflective practice and contribute to the professional development of preservice teachers.

### *Portfolio Support*

Many students found the discussion of the portfolio during their seminar classes to be one of, if not the most, valuable component of the two-semester seminar course. Statements such as “I was able to gain a clearer understanding of the portfolio” and “the discussions in class and with my classmates helped me create a portfolio that I’m proud to show family and potential employers” illustrate that support specific to the development of teaching portfolios is crucial to its success for both the teacher-education institution and the students. One student stated that “activities that forced me to explain ‘how and why’ make me grow as a person and as a teacher,” illustrating that the process of discussing and creating a teaching portfolio, in conjunction with coursework, was a personally and professionally valuable experience resulting in a product that is an authentic representation of the student’s development as a teacher.

An interesting subtheme, visible across the majority of students’ responses, was an interest in continuing to add to the portfolio beyond the students’ seminar coursework. This student’s comment illustrates this theme: “I am proud of my portfolio. I think it really shows the journey that I have made as a teacher.... It is something that I hope will grow and change in the future because I recognize that mine is a profession that is always changing.” This, too, suggests that the work we did in class contributed to the students’ overall understanding of the purpose of a growth-and-development portfolio and how the portfolio-development process can contribute to the students’ growth as teaching professionals.

However, not all students felt that the portfolio-development process provided new insight into their development as beginning teachers, as this statement illustrates: “I have always had a strong opinion and clear view of my practice of teaching, and the development of my portfolio really did not alter or enhance that in any major way.” Statements such as this help us to realize that the development of a teaching portfolio is a unique process and one that does not affect all students in the same way. Additionally, the above statement suggests a possible need to establish baseline data at the start of the program for each student. For example, students could write a draft educational philosophy statement and then revisit it toward the end of their clinical practicum. This process could help them see how they’ve developed and grown as a novice teacher. If one of the purposes of creating a growth-and-development portfolio is for students to reflect on how they have developed over the course of a professional teacher-preparation program, then it is important that students have artifacts that

represent their thinking and abilities at various points throughout the program. Writing a draft educational philosophy statement early on would be one such document.

In addition, these data suggest the need to adjust certain activities and discussions focused on supporting portfolio development. Students struggled with organizing their artifact selections into portfolio sections; at times, the students remained stuck on the quantity and type of artifacts to include rather than on the content of the artifacts and how to shape the accompanying narrative. In an exit interview, one student commented on the need for more guidance overall: "I needed more direction on what to put into my portfolio. I liked the discussions we had about how to decide what to put in and how to connect that with what I want my portfolio to say about me, but I just think giving some sort of list on what has to be included upfront would help with some of these questions we all had."

Research suggests (see Barton & Collins, 1993; Simmons, 1996; Ryan & Kuhs, 1993) that the struggle over artifact selection links directly to the benefits of creating a portfolio; data in the present study suggest that providing a framework from which to select artifacts and organize the portfolios can assist students with this difficult task.

In addition to the organizational challenge, the limited amount of time students had to complete their teaching portfolio was also a challenge for many, an issue well documented in the current literature on teaching portfolios (see Grant & Heubner, 1998; Lyons, 1998). Even though the discussion of teaching portfolios was integrated into the seminar course right from the beginning, it was not until midway through the fall semester that students were required to bring in potential artifacts for inclusion in their portfolio. Additionally, the portfolio was due in April (a program requirement), one month prior to the completion of their student-teaching semester. Realistically, these two time constraints contributed to a very short development timeframe.

### *Multiple Purposes*

As the literature states, without a clear understanding of what the purpose is, the process of creating a teaching portfolio can cause stress and, for many, becomes a meaningless activity (Simmons, 1996; Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). Rather than contributing to the students' professional development, the portfolio process is seen as just another program requirement. I worked with my students to focus on shifting the purpose of the portfolio from employment to one that represents growth and development. Students' statements such as "it definitely charts the journey that I have traveled" and "it became a portfolio that reflected a fair amount of my growth and development" reflect how the students made connections with the portfolio's growth-and-development purpose. Additionally, when asked about the purpose of their portfolio, most students also stated that they wanted to use it to represent their knowledge and skills to potential employers. The following statement, taken during an exit interview, illustrates this thinking: "My teaching portfolio will be largely used for employment purposes, something I can offer to show to my possible employer to help them see a snapshot of what I believe, how I teach, and my idea of good learning."

Many teaching institutions implement teaching portfolios to which multiple purposes are attached. And with employment a primary goal for students completing a teacher-preparation program, it is understandable why employment remained a seminal purpose for the students involved in the study. Clearly, a teaching portfolio that represents a student's knowledge and skills specific to teaching and learning is one that should also be shown to prospective employers. Yet, some artifacts contained in a growth-and-development portfolio are ones

typically not considered example of best practices. For example, a number of lesson plans created at different points in the professional sequence might be selected for the purpose of showing a student's evolution regarding planning effective learning experiences. However, students might be motivated to select only their best lesson plans when employment is a salient focus. While illustrating growth over time, represented in a variety of artifacts, is exactly the purpose and benefit of this type of portfolio, showing such artifacts to prospective employers could be difficult for some students and could contribute to their vulnerability and resistance to selecting artifacts that do not reflect their current abilities.

### **Implications and Next Steps**

As the use of teaching portfolios within teacher-preparation programs continues to grow and mature, the process of shifting and adjusting the portfolio's existing requirements and purpose to ensure that it compliments and reflects programmatic goals could become more commonplace. However, there is little to be gained from shifting an existing portfolio's purpose without attending to the challenges that face this process.

The themes and patterns articulated in the data suggest three possible responses to furthering the shift of the ECEL department's portfolio requirement from employment to growth and development: early introduction, increasing support, and communication.

#### *Early Introduction*

The first possible response, and the largest challenge that these data suggest, is that the portfolio must be introduced much earlier in the professional sequence in order for students to realistically represent their growth and development over time in a teaching portfolio. Offering support or mentoring during the final student-teaching semester is not early enough. Students need to engage in ongoing structured conversations specific to the development of their growth-and-development teaching portfolios at the same time that they are developing into beginning teachers through coursework and field experiences. Students in this study talked about not having saved work from previous courses, resulting in limited artifacts from which to choose and reflect upon, thus reinforcing the need for earlier intervention. The following student comment illustrates the importance of giving students adequate time to develop a growth-and-development portfolio: "I think that teaching portfolios need to be started SIGNIFICANTLY earlier than they were introduced to me and my classmates. It was too late to really accumulate and represent true growth and development, and instead they took on the role of being largely for employment purposes."

Without the benefit of time, it is impossible for students to engage in thoughtful reflection on their growth and development. One obvious way to address this issue is to begin the portfolio-development process earlier in the professional sequence by integrating portfolio directives and guidance into courses that are taken at various stages in the professional sequence. However, a significant structural roadblock that impacts this suggestion is that the ECEL program employs a loosely structured course sequence. While a *suggested* course sequence is provided to students during orientation and advising meetings, students are not required to follow these recommendations when registering for courses. Consequently, it is not unusual for students to take the introduction to education course (listed on the course sequence document as one of the first courses to be taken) while enrolled in the final curriculum-development course (taken just prior to student teaching). This example suggests that students could have received instruction specific to their portfolios during a course taken

previously, which would have made the framing of such support activities difficult at best. As a result, during the second year of this study, the department will be offering a variety of portfolio workshops intended to offer support to students who are at various points in the development of their teaching portfolios.

Another option would be to offer a portfolio-development course as part of the program sequence, which would afford students time to discuss issues in a regularly structured environment. However, this suggestion raises issues of context, timing, resources, and credit load, and it implies a one-time support format. The development of faculty- and student-mentor relationships is another way some teacher-education institutions have addressed student support needs. Suggestions include monthly meetings of mentor groups, pairing of critical friends for the purpose of sharing one-on-one communication about the portfolio's purpose and the portfolio-development process, support in weekly practicum or student-teaching seminars, and assigned faculty mentors to whom students can turn with questions, concerns, or issues raised during the creation of their portfolios. While these relationships have proved helpful for the students and informative for the teacher educators, their voluntary nature also can be problematic, resulting in sporadic participation and lack of clarity and understanding of the portfolio's purposes and requirements; thus, the relationships tend to offer uneven benefits to students.

### *Increasing Support*

The second possible response highlights the need to expand the use of the two-semester seminar as a primary form of support to all seminar sections. To accommodate this, all seminar instructors will need training in the following year. The training needs to be implemented in stages with the first phase focusing on the large issues of the portfolio's shifting purpose, artifact selection, and development of reflective narratives. The forms of support that were implemented during the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the study also will need to be modified. One issue to address is the need to provide students additional support specific to artifact selection. Additional support in this area could ensure that the artifacts more clearly illustrate the students' growth and development over time. Students' need for such guidance in subsequent years will be accommodated with a list of required artifacts; such a list is often called a "prescribed evidence list," containing the type and number of specific artifacts required for each portfolio. The list might contain such items as the number of lesson plans, student work samples, assessment tools, personal documents (e.g., curriculum vitae, observation evaluations, transcripts), photographs, and narrative statements to include. However, the selection of the specific artifact from this list (e.g., which lesson plan) will then be left to the student, a practice that supports the importance of struggling with artifact selection previously discussed.

The issue of reflection—its purpose, the process, and the development of reflective narrative statements—will also require attention and support in subsequent years. It is important to remember that the mere act of reflection is not sufficient evidence that a student is a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) or even a good teacher. Student comments can have the tendency to be "rich in description but generally lack thoughtful analysis and interpretation" upon which "explicit guidelines for the reflection statement" were implemented (Wolf, 1991, p. 132). During the two-semester seminar course, the importance of reflection was discussed, and the students regularly engaged in open, reflective dialog about

their teaching portfolios. However, additional guidelines and reflective narrative samples are needed to help students engage in increased critical reflection upon their work and development overall. Finally, while the portfolio has a growth-and-development focus, using it to gain employment remains important to the students. Therefore, future seminars will discuss the use of the portfolio during the interview process. These suggestions will be implemented in subsequent years of this multiyear study.

### *Communication*

The third possible response highlights the importance of communication among the department faculty, as well as with students responsible for completing the portfolio requirement. Generally, most faculty members in my department are not engaged in discussions with their students regarding the proposed shift in the portfolio's purpose. However, if we are to be successful in shifting the existing portfolio's purpose, the faculty will need to embrace the proposed changes in focus and process. Without faculty buy-in toward a new purpose for the teaching portfolio, resulting in new ways of implementing, supporting, and assessing the portfolio requirement, faculty and students will continue to think of the portfolio as an employment tool rather than a tool that can promote students' professional development as well as illustrate such growth to university faculty and K-5 school administrators. Conversations among the department's faculty and chair, specific to promoting a change in thinking, have already started through discussions of this study's research findings to date. Additional conversations among the faculty, as well as others within the College of Education and Human Services, will continue in the second year of this multiyear study.

Finally, with our program employing a loosely structured course sequence, it will be a challenge to communicate the shift in the portfolio's purpose to students. Ideas for communicating these goals earlier in the program include offering portfolio workshops each semester, including information on the portfolio requirement during student orientations and open houses, including information on the portfolio requirement on the department Web site, and listing the portfolio requirement on course information documents and during student advising. While these options will most likely contribute to an increase in knowledge among the students regarding the portfolio's adjusted purpose, they rely on student involvement, which might result in a hit-or-miss approach. However, it is hoped that a multifaceted approach to student communication will ensure that all students receive the message regarding the portfolio's shifting purpose. The suggestions addressed thus far will be adopted and studied during the second year of this multiyear study, with an understanding of these possible challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The next steps in our department's journey to shift the existing teaching portfolio's requirement are many. Increasing student support, improving communication, and expanding the implementation of the teaching-portfolio requirements are issues to be addressed in the next year of this study. Additionally, the assessment of the teaching portfolio (e.g., specifying assessment criteria, creation of assessment tools, tracking student portfolio grades) will need attention. My colleagues and I feel that good progress has been made; however, we also recognize that much work remains. It is integral to the success of this initiative that the department chair and faculty members continue to discuss the portfolio requirement and the

challenges we face specific to shifting the portfolio's current purpose to one that reflects how our teacher candidates are developing over time and how such development contributes to their readiness to becoming beginning teachers. At the heart of these discussions is that a long-range structured approach is needed if we are to be successful in shifting the purpose of our existing teaching-portfolio requirement.

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